

Stage Buzz

What's New in New York City Theatre

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Review - The Aspern Papers (Turtle Shell Productions)

Stage Buzz Review by Byrne Harrison

I will admit that my knowledge of Henry James is limited to *Washington Square*, and only then by way of its stage adaptation, *The Heiress*. *The Aspern Papers*, adapted by Martin Zuckerman from Henry James's novella, is a pleasant surprise. Although very similar in tone and story to *The Heiress*, it is an interesting play about an unscrupulous man who will do almost anything to get what he wants.

Walter Scampo (Kelly King) is an academic, a writer with a particular interest in a classical poet named Jeffrey Aspern (think of someone like Lord Byron). He has traveled to Venice to find Juliana Bordereau (Carol Lambert), now an ancient woman living in the care of her spinster niece, Tita (Elisabeth Grace Rothan), but once the muse and lover of Aspern. Scampo believes that she holds Aspern's heretofore unpublished early works and letters. Quickly realizing that he will never be able to fool Juliana into giving him the papers, he works on bringing Tita under his influence, thrilling her with opportunities to escape her drab, confined life. What follows is a play about exploitation, but just who is exploiting whom is hard to tell.

The cast is strong, in fact, one of the strongest of the recent Turtle Shell productions. Lambert is excellent as the old lady. At times playing frail and faltering for the unctuous Scampo, she'll explode in passion the moment he leaves the scene. A difficult change to pull off, but Lambert does it well. Rothan is exceptional in her role, going from timid and unsure to jaded and vindictive by the end of the play. King's does a good job playing the oh-so-slick Scampo, but his Scampo comes across as mildly sleazy and untrustworthy from the beginning. Unlike the character of Townsend in *The Heiress*, the audience is never given the chance to wonder if this character might actually be on the up and up. This takes some of the dramatic tension and complexity out of the play.

The production values of the Turtle Shell presentations get better with each new play. Kyle Dixon's set is excellent, showing the former luxury and decay in the Venetian villa and in the family that inhabits it. His use of a folding screen to create Juliana's bedroom is a particularly clever use of the small stage. While at times it makes the scene changes a little awkward, it is nevertheless unique and interesting. Lighting designer Shaun Suchan helps create a lush Mediterranean feel onstage.

Director Shawn Rozsa shows that he is as deft with drama as he is with the wild comedy of the recent production of *Scapin*. Turtle Shell's production on Martin M. Zuckerman's adaptation of *The Aspern Papers* is well worth a look.

Adapted from Henry James's novella by Martin M. Zuckerman
Producer/Artistic Director: John W. Cooper

Directed by Shawn Rozsa
Scenic Designer: Kyle Dixon
Costume Designer: A. Christina Giannini
Sound Designer: Patrick Grant
Lighting Designer: Shaun Suchan
Production Manager and Marketing: Jeremy Handelman
Stage Manager: Marina Steinberg
House Manager/ASM: Ava Eisenson
Carpenter: Peter Estella
Group Sales: Mona Weisberg
Graphic Designer: Karen Shambley

Featuring Kelly King (Walter Scampo), Elisabeth Grace Rothan (Tita Bordereau), Carol Lambert (Juliana Bordereau), Nico Evers-Swindell (Voice of Young Aspern).

Turtle's Shell Theater
300 W. 43rd Street, 4th Floor

May 2-24

Mon. at 7 PM, Thurs.-Sat. at 8 PM (except May 22nd). Special matinee May 24th at 3 PM.

Visit www.theatermania.com for tickets.

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